



**King County Mental Health Chemical Abuse and Dependency Services Division
2002 Briefing Paper**

SEATTLE MUNICIPAL MENTAL HEALTH COURT

BACKGROUND:

On any given day, almost 300 of the 1,600 inmates in the King County Jail have severe mental illness and, on average, more than 1/3 of the misdemeanants in this population are seen in Seattle Municipal Court. It is believed that many of these individuals could be successful participants in the community if they had ongoing linkages to appropriate mental health services rather than being “criminalized” because of their behavior. Once in jail, they often decompensate further, and may be disconnected from professional and family support as well. Typically, these individuals will fail to comply with traditional court-imposed obligations, which will then result in repeated cycling through the system with additional costs for warrants, re-arrests, re-bookings, re-jailings, court hearings, etc. This often leads to lengthier sentences because added jail time is frequently imposed when an offender fails to comply.

The Seattle Municipal Court (SMC) has conducted a pilot Mental Health Court since March of 1999. The goal of the Mental Health Court is to improve the integration of the mental health and criminal justice systems through successful diversions or expedited resolutions of the misdemeanor criminal proceedings of mentally ill offenders (MIOs), accompanied by attendant discharge planning that includes intensive and active case management, combined with housing and treatment support. The Mental Health Court Team includes a dedicated judge, public defender, court liaison, probation officers and a part-time social worker.

The SMC Mental Health Court model is based on immediate intervention into the underlying causes of the criminal behavior, linking treatment resources with ordered obligations and assuring monitoring for compliance without the MIO having to serve additional jail time as an unintended consequence. The model emphasizes prompt engagement in mental health treatment services to reduce jail time for mentally ill offenders and improve their potential for reintegration into the community. The approach promotes client-focused, systems integration by providing specialized case management at the time of the defendant’s first appearance (arraignment). Misdemeanor defendants with mental illnesses are eligible to receive services through the Mental Health Court.

ISSUES/CHALLENGES:

Through a Memorandum of Understanding, the City of Seattle currently provides \$103,000 to support the Seattle Municipal Mental Health Court liaison position and some outpatient services for non-Medicaid clients. More funding is needed to support the Mental Health Court and community management of participants including additional staff to support an increase in caseload, outpatient services for non-Medicaid clients, detox and residential chemical dependency treatment for clients with co-occurring mental health and chemical dependency disorders, and crisis as well as interim and long-term housing for Mental Health Court participants.

DATA:

Numbers of Persons Served in 2001: 508

RECOMMENDATION/LEGISLATIVE ACTION:

The Mental Health Court offers a model distinct from existing practices that has the potential to reduce the demand for jail services while promoting positive outcomes for defendants and the public. It is recommended that the systems that facilitated the creation of the Mental Health Court sustain their commitment to this process.